

## **Censorship and The Cave**

Western societies such as Australia are regarded as "soft" where democracy, technology, education, consumerism, a high standard of living are part of growing up today. Freedoms are protected under law - anti-discrimination, equal opportunity, freedom of information, privacy, consumer protection, child protection, free speech, labour laws and many others. There is "free" education, "free" medical care, and a social welfare system. Individual rights and the pursuit of personal goals are a strong creed with adolescents in particular, exploring and experimenting with sexuality, work, spirituality, body image, social groups, music, the internet and the bombardment of images offered by the media and advertising.

With all the privileges of these Western freedoms, has also come breakdowns - high divorce rate, family failure, relationship violence, AIDS, drugs, alcohol, youth gangs, increasing crime rate, destructive debts, ethnic conflict, excessive behaviours, loss of direction, increase in mental illness.

Powerful YA literature is a means of engaging young adults in their exploration of human relationships, themselves and the world in their search for identity. It can be a potent way of accessing the freedoms of democracy, offering youth positive pathways towards adulthood.

Young adults expect and demand the freedoms of expression which are the basis of democracy. As a consequence they will not engage in dishonest literature. They will not engage in didactic literature. They can and will engage in relevant, well written, honest story journey.

Young adults can and do read adult literature. However young adult books are different to adult books. YA literature which deals with social realism can be more confronting than adult literature. YA books often grapple with sexuality, strong emotions, dependence versus independence, youth culture. As a consequence it can activate the GATEKEEPERS who wish to "protect" our adolescents. The irony is that this type of censorship of YA literature can act in the reverse way. Real protection is effective communication of the issues that impact on young people and their future. Story journey enables the reader to experience the journey safely.

My YA novel *The Cave* has activated some gatekeepers. Despite society's concerns about youth drugs, suicide, peer group mob action, dislocation, some gatekeepers have questioned the hard hitting nature of *The Cave*. Some publishers, librarians, adults have been concerned about its confronting revelation of youth culture, the honesty of language, the subject matter. *The Cave* exposes, celebrates, and reveals youth culture today. There is sexuality, humour,

violence, peer group pressure, rage parties, courage, parents, spirituality, and values.

Dr Carole Kayrooz Director of Postgraduate Studies in Communication and Education University of Canberra says of *The Cave*:-

*The Cave* is a gritty story of courage and hope for those in the passage between youth and adulthood. Both compassionate and confronting, Susanne Gervay takes us on a journey, eight days' camping with the hero Knox and his mates including Fat George, Bennie and Jones, and the evil Watts.

This journey was eight days of descending into fear, exhaustion, ravines and rivers, each in their own way carving out a sense of self-knowing and mateship; eight days of reverie where past and present ghosts comfort and perplex. Ultimately, in the cave, Knox comes to a sense of responsibility and authenticity that is more powerful than the mystery of the Rave Party or Watts metal tip leather boots.

As a psychologist, I recognise the private maelstrom engulfing many young adults, in-transit between powerlessness and independence. As an educationalist, I appreciate the groups' ambivalence towards their two guides, Seaton and Sarah, and towards a society that alienates and fragments. As a reader, Susanne Gervay compels us, like the river that is part of her story, towards the rancid murky Cave, the final place of initiation.

This is an epic story beautifully written with clear spare prose and the ability to go right to the heart of young males in modern society.

Dr Judy Thistleton-Martin, Lecturer in Literature & Literacy, University of Western Sydney says:-

Susanne Gervay's novel, *The Cave*, explores constructions of masculinity with confronting honesty. She questions the traditional forms of masculine rites of passage and challenges the reader to consider alternatives. To Gervay it's people who count and make a difference, not test of physical endurance and achievement. The boys are positioned to question who they are, and who they hope to become. There are no winners or losers in *The Cave*.

My son was seventeen when I wrote *The Cave*. It was one of the toughest books I have ever written. Writing in first person, getting inside a male's mind was very demanding. It's very different to a girl's way of thinking. My son was generous in sharing his experiences with me and helping me understand what it is like to be an adolescent male in Australia. He "gave it to me" when I went "soft" in the book. I always listened.

I am surrounded by young males - my nephew, my son, their friends - and I have been caught up in the maelstrom of their humour, hormones, larrikinism and emotions. It is a chaotic, wild time filled with sweaty football boots, endless raids into the fridge, experimentation, mates and girls.

These boys have been on these outdoor camps. Some of them came back shell-shocked at discovering the male capacity for violence. Others came back with an understanding of mateship and courage.

The Cave became a compulsion as I searched and researched the expectations placed on our boys today. It took a year to write as I emotionally journeyed with them into the wilderness and themselves.

Young adult males often do not read, but they will read if it is relevant and real. It is the responsibility of gatekeepers to present male youth with literature that empowers them. Restricting access to books which gives youth a voice, is a disservice to them.

Gatekeepers should open the gate to story journeys like The Cave, where youth can question and search for their place in the world.